

# ED412168 1997-03-00 Picture Books as a Social Studies Resource in the Elementary School Classroom. ERIC Digest.

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# Picture Books as a Social Studies Resource in the Elementary School Classroom. ERIC Digest.

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As we enter the "information age," our need to process volumes of data quickly and efficiently increases. The adage "a picture is worth a thousand words" suggests the expressive power of images. Elements of design--line, shape, color, value, and space--are the lexicon of images. Organized and ordered by the design principles--balance, emphasis, harmony, variety, gradation, movement, rhythm, and proportion--an image's expressive qualities are determined by these factors. Visual literacy, the ability to comprehend meaning in images, requires critical viewing skills. Unlike moving images, images in picture books allow the sustained viewing time necessary for developing critical viewing skills through exploration, critique, and reflection. Although commonly considered part of the literary arts, picture books are useful tools for teaching many abstract and complex concepts of the social studies at the elementary level.

## IMAGES AS ALLEGORIES

Images may function as allegories which provide intuitive understanding of complex events or relationships. A powerful image may become a mental "bookmark" of a historic event by capturing and freezing the essence of the represented event in visual allegory. Critical viewing will reveal not only the facts of the event, but also the artist's bias or point of view which either concurs with or stands in contrast to pervasive public opinion of the event. A two-volume series--"Photos that Made U.S. History, Volume I: From the Civil War to the Atomic Age," and "Volume II: From the Cold War to the Space Age," both by Edward and Daniel Wakin (1993, Walker & Company)--presents bookmark historic images followed by text which sets the scene, introduces the photographer, and describes how each photograph shaped public sentiment and government policies. Photographs, posters, paintings, and primary documents from the archives of the Library of Congress are organized in a series of thematic books by Martin W. Sandler: "Pioneers" (1994), "Cowboys" (1994), "Civil War" (1996), and "Immigrants" (1995, HarperCollins Publishers).

## HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPHERS AND ARTISTS.

"Shadow Catcher: The Life and Work of Edward S. Curtis" by Laurie Lawler (1994, Walker & Co.) examines the life work of Curtis and his ethnographic documentation of native North Americans. "Dorothea Lange" by Robyn Montana Turner (1994, Little,

Brown & Co.) chronicles the life and work of the photographer whose work includes the "Migrant Mother," an image which came to epitomize the anguish and despair of the Great Depression. "Capturing Nature: The Writing and Art of John James Audubon," edited by Peter and Connie Roop and illustrated by Rick Farley (1993, Walker & Co.), introduces an artist-explorer of the American frontier and his watercolor documentation of native American wildlife.

## ILLUSTRATED STORYBOARD NARRATIVE

Rather than encapsulating events in a single image, artist/illustrators may present a series of images that creates a storyboard narrative of the event from beginning to conclusion. This method is particularly effective when the described events are of a magnitude or complexity that otherwise would be difficult for young learners to grasp. Although sensitively composed illustrations may allow audiences only a surface understanding of an event, the spiritual essence of the story is maintained. "Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky," written and illustrated by Faith Ringgold (1992, Crown Publishers); "White Socks Only" by Evelyn Coleman, illustrated by Tyrone Geter (1996, Albert Whitman & Co.); and "The Feather-Bed Journey" by Paula Kurzband Feder, illustrated by Stacey Schiett (1995, Albert Whitman & Co.) all present difficult periods or experiences of social history through illustrations and text that offer gentle explanation while inviting contemplation and further exploration of the themes.

## ILLUSTRATED TIMELINES

Timelines are frequently used in teaching to show sequence and continuity. When images are used to describe relationships, comprehension of multilayered, intricate, and integrated connections is enhanced. DK Publishing produces a variety of picture books which encourage young viewers to make connections between various experiential understandings and cognitive knowledge. Among these publications are "Chronicle of the World" (1996), "Steven Biesty's Incredible Explosions" by Richard Platt (1996), and "Incredible Comparisons" by Russell Ash (1996, DK Publishing). Usborne picture books, "The Usborne Time Traveller Books" (1993) and "The Usborne Book of World History" by Lisa Miles (1995, Usborne Publishing, Ltd.), expand the notion of the timeline by including many annotated images which present each historic era from multiple perspectives. "The Greek News" by Anton Powell and Philip Steele (1996, Candlewick Press) and "The Roman News" by Andrew Langley and Philip DeSouza (1996, Candlewick Press) present ancient history in a contemporary format which encourages identification with universal human experiences and emotions through time.

## MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION THROUGH DIVERSE SOCIO-CULTURAL IMAGES

When text is integrated with image, a symbiotic interaction occurs. Excellent illustrations are an extension of literal text, and integral to comprehension of the narrative. This is a particularly important consideration when selecting picture books which present multicultural images.

Styles of depiction which identify an era or reflect a culture enhance cognitive and aesthetic understanding. An example of this is found in "Dia's Story Cloth: The Hmong People's Journey of Freedom" by Dia Cha (1996, Lee & Low). A traditional Hmong art form created by Chue and Nhia Thao Cha presents the story. Assemblages and paintings by Paul Morin reflect a Native American culture and illustrate the story of "The Ghost Dance" by Alice McLerran (1995, Clarion Books). Cultural art expression is incorporated in both the visual text and the narrative of "Abuela's Weave" by Omar S. Castaneda, illustrated by Enrique O. Sanchez (1993, Lee & Low) and "Luka's Quilt," written and illustrated by Georgia Guback (1994, Greenwillow Books); while synthesis of culture and art are seen in "A Prairie Year" by Jo Bannatyne-Cugnet, art by Yvette Moore (1994, Tundra Books) and "Heartland" by Diane Siebert, paintings by Wendell Minor (1989, HarperTrophy).

## DEVELOPING SOCIAL EMPATHY THROUGH PICTURES

Quality of line, value, color, and the artist's style of characterization convey messages that guide young audiences to empathic understanding of contemporary social issues and/or global experiences. The varied hopes, dreams, fears, and experiences of child immigrants are expressed in equally varied artistic styles in "Leaving for America" by Roslyn Breenick-Perry, illustrated by Mira Reisberg (1992, Children's Book Press); "All the Lights in the Night" by Arthur A. Levine, illustrated by James E. Ransome (1991, Tambourine Books); and "The Little Weaver of Thai Yen Village" by Tran-Khanh-Tuyet, illustrated by Nancy Home (1986, Children's Book Press).

"Someplace to Go" by Maria Testa, illustrated by Karen Ritz (1996, Albert Whitman & Co.); "Baseball Saved Us" by Ken Mochiziki, illustrated by Dom Lee (1993, Lee & Low); and "Friends from the Other Side" by Gloria Anzaldua, illustrated by Consuelo Mendez (1993, Children's Book Press) present painful experiences in muted colors and dark tones. These picture books may be launching points for discussion of difficult and controversial social problems. "Crack in the Wall," by Mary Elizabeth Haggerty, illustrated by Reuben de Anda (1993, Lee & Low), relies on sparse visual detail to convey poverty, while translucent watercolor hues suggest the universal theme of hope and wealth in human affection. A similar theme is addressed in "Amelia's Road" by Linda Jacobs Altman, illustrated by Enrique O. Sanchez (1993, Lee & Low); "Calling the Doves" by Juan Feliz Herrera, illustrated by Ely Simmons (1995, Children's Book Press); and "Going Home" by Eve Bunting, illustrated by David Diaz (1996, Joanna Cotler Books, HarperCollins Publishers). Each looks at the experience of life in a migrant worker family from a different perspective.

## FOCAL POINTS OF LESSONS ON HUMAN SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

The beautifully detailed images of "The Children of China: An Artist's Journey" by Song Nan Zhang (1995, Tundra Books) reveal both the variety and universality of certain cultural, family, and childhood experiences. "Abuelita's Paradise" by Carmen Santiago Nodar, illustrated by Diane Paterson (1992, Albert Whitman & Co.); "Sachiko Means Happiness" by Kimiko Sakai, illustrated by Tomie Arai (1990, Children's Book Press); and "The Spirit of Tio Fernando: A Day of the Dead Story" by Janice Levy, illustrated by Morella Fuenmayor (1995, Albert Whitman & Co.) look at intergenerational relationships and adjustment to loss of loved ones through the eyes of children from different cultures.

Learning to write one's name is a landmark experience of self-discovery. Becoming literate opens the door to the world beyond the daily experience. The transcending excitement of literacy is described by Ted Lewin, who builds rhythm of line and detail to a climactic ending with dramatic chiaroscuro in "The Day of Ahmed's Secret" by Florence Parry Heide and Judith Heide Gilliland (1990, Mulberry Books).

Any of the picture books suggested here might be used as a focal point of a social studies lesson or unit. As the literal narrative initiates discussion, the images may be critically read and contemplated for greater understanding of the topics they present. In doing so, young students may come to celebrate similarities and differences among people of many cultures, recognize that basic human problems are globally shared by children of diverse cultures, and come to empathize with the universality of the human condition in an environment of tolerance and acceptance.

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